CHAPTER IV: ACUPUNCTURE: AN EVIDENCE-BASED ASSESSMENT

Western Medicine vs. Chinese Medicine

When these physicians first came back from China in the late 1970s, they needed a way to figure out what this other medicine, this other way of looking at the body was. Because unlike chiropractic or massage or some of the other complementary and alternative therapies that you have heard about, like naturopathy, acupuncture, and Chinese medicine see a different body. Chiropractic sees the same body as western medicine, massage does too basically, but acupuncture and oriental medicine see a different body. How do we begin to explain the other way of looking at how the body works?

Well, what the Chinese say is that there is a kind of energy, which they call qi, that flows through the body in 12 interconnected channels, also called meridians. As soon as we say this, the anatomist, the western anatomist and the physicians who have been trained in dissecting cadavers, they say, now wait a minute, what are these channels and meridians? We've seen nerves, we've seen blood vessels, and we've seen lymphatics. We don't see any channels or meridians in the body, what is this all about? Besides, there is no energy that runs through the body like this. We know about metabolic energy or mechanical energy, kinetic energy in the body, but we don't know anything about this energy and we certainly would have seen it if it was there.

Not to be undone, anyone who is presenting this new medicine would then have had to say, not only is there this energy in the body, but the blockages and the flow of qi of this energy cause imbalances that may result in disease. Now from a western point of view, it's bacteria and viruses that cause disease, we know that. I mean it's metabolic and genetic disorders that cause disease. If we are enlightened, we can even say environmental toxins cause disease, but there is no disease that we know of that is caused by an imbalance in the flow of energy in the body. Well, what do we make of that? The Chinese then say that these imbalances can be corrected by inserting fine needles at specified points along the channels.

At this point, I was working in the City of Hope Medical Center, a major western biomedical research center. The more I got interested in this, the more I talked to my colleagues, the more skepticism that I confronted. What was the skepticism about? There's no physical basis. There's nothing. We can't find anything relating to acupuncture points. There are no meridians that we can see in the body. It has no physical basis, so at best, this medicine must be a very good placebo and we'll get into what that could mean. Secondly, they say, there's no evidence that it works. When we believe a condition can be treated with a given kind of treatment, whether it's drugs or physical therapy or surgery, we test that. The FDA insists that any new treatment be tested in a very rigorous, strict manner before it's accepted into clinical practice. There was no evidence at the time for acupuncture.

What were these early attitudes about? First, I think a lot of these early attitudes were about what I call linear thinking. In the west, once Galileo and Copernicus came around and showed us and convinced us finally that the earth was not the center of the universe, then the old theory was wrong—we had a new theory. So, a new theory like platetonics comes along and we know the old theories about the continents being the tips of huge masses that go all the way down to the center of the earth were wrong; the new theory comes along, and the old theory is wrong. We have a very difficult time in the west holding two different ways of explaining the same set of phenomena and that was the challenge for us with Chinese medicine. A whole different explanation of health and illness.

Second, is what we can call the tomato effect. What's the tomato effect about? In the mid-1980's, there was a wonderful article that was written in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* called "The Tomato Effect." It was written by pharmacologists, and it talked about the history of pharmacology in terms of drugs and other pharmacological treatments that people knew worked. But they didn't fit into the way we thought the body worked, didn't fit into the dominant paradigm of how we understood medicine and so they weren't used.

So, why "tomato effect"? Because tomatoes were indigenous to South America; mainly, the Portuguese and other European explorers went to South America and first brought back the tomatoes to Europe. We know it totally changed pasta. In France, the tomatoes were called love apples, but in colonial America, people would not eat a tomato because they knew it was in the nightshade family like belladonna. It was poisonous. It didn't matter what they heard from Europe, that people ate tomatoes; they were convinced that it was poisonous. So, there's a wonderful story about a politician standing on the courthouse steps in New Jersey and eating a tomato and showing people that you didn't keel over dead from a tomato.

They end this article by saying, in modern western medicine, before we accept any new treatment, we want to be sure it's not a placebo, but before we reject any new treatment, we should also make sure it's not a tomato. So, that's where the tomato effect comes. The article had nothing to do with acupuncture, but clearly, this is another wonderful example of the tomato effect, where acupuncture and Chinese medicine don't fit the prevailing paradigm or the way we see health and disease.